Azamat Akbarov

Linguistic Explorations of Multilingualism

MUZEUM HISTORII POLSKI

Linguistic Explorations of Multilingualism

Azamat AKBAROV
Kazakh National University
E-mail: azamatakbar@yahoo.com

Abstract: This paper provides an overview of linguistic studies of multilingualism. In the beginning of this paper, a brief survey on attitude to the phenomenon of multilingualism and linguistic diversity throughout history is given, which shows that multilingualism has actually been natural to most human societies. Despite this fact, multilingual capacities of individuals and societies had generally been neglected in linguistic studies before the second half of the 20th century, with linguists having investigated mainly individual languages as isolated systems. Sociolinguists and linguistic anthropologists were among first people to have realized the importance of avoiding of monolingual prejudices. With recent increased attention towards this phenomenon, multilingualism is today studied and explored in various linguistic disciplines. A large number of terms and fields of research shows that the study is gradually emerging as a new discipline, although the field would benefit from more common terms. Following the definition and delimitation of the basic terms related to multilingualism, perspective for future research is given.

Keywords: multilingualism, diversity, linguistics, communication, bilingualism

1. Multilingualism throughout History

The phenomenon of diversity has held an important part in the reflection of language for a long time. How there are so many languages in the world is a common question. For centuries, the explanation for linguistic diversity has been searched for in mythology and religion, where it is usually connected to the origin of language and the first common language of humankind. Judeo-Christian tradition was dominated by the narrative about the Tower of Babel and the existence of different languages was interpreted as the wrath of the Creator because of human arrogance. The humans unanimously built the Tower to endanger the Creator's undoubted authority. This narrative represents the deeply rooted belief that humankind was monolingual in the beginning, that before the destruction of the Tower, all humans spoke the same language, and that "mixing human language" was God's punishment to humankind. However, though it supposes that one language was common, that narrative does not give an answer to the question of which language was primal, the question that has been occupying human attention and awakening imagination for ages. Attempts to solve this question reach into the distant past. The Greek Historian Herodotus reports that the Egyptian Pharaoh (663–610 B.C.) ordered that two new-born babies be isolated and closed up before they heard a single language. The result was that after two years, the babies said 'becos', the Phrygian word for 'bread'. Similar experiments

were conducted in Europe in the middle ages, as well as in some other parts of the world. For example, the Mughal emperor Akbar (1552–1602) believed that children that are isolated from the world will not speak any language (J. Edwards 1994). The beginnings of systematic scientific explanations for linguistic diversity and theories about the oldest language appear at the beginning of the 18th century. Linguistics has not yet given clear and unambiguous answers to many aspects of this question (R. Bugarski 1997).

The use of different languages was an unavoidable characteristic of specific societies that were in search of mutual contact. It was not possible to communicate with others without multilingual practice: trade and new territory conquest would not be possible, and there was no possibility of cultural effect (R. Franceschini 2009). There is proof of multilingual communication from the distant past. Sumerian documents about ways to learn foreign languages were found, whereby people used clay plates to learn new languages. Any type of communication between different societies required multilingual practice. Other than that, multilingual societies alone have been present since the earliest times of mankind (L. Aronin/ B. Hufeisen 2009). Those societies formed with the migration of population, in which new people on specific territory would meet the domicile population. Multilingual societies also formed with the conquest of new territories and with the creation of the first great empires. One language used to dominate in these empires, but there were empires that acknowledged more languages, like the Achaemenid Empire.

The hitherto found inscriptions from the period of their reign (6th–3rd century BC) bear evidence to the widespread multilingual practice under the reign of the Achaemenid. The content of the stone inscriptions from this period are most often recorded in Old Persian, Elamite, and Akkadian. Some inscriptions are only in Old Persian and Old Egyptian (S.A. Mirbaqari et al. 2004). There are indications that inscriptions in Greek existed from the reign of Darius the Great (550–486 B.C.) in Suez (E. Tucker 2007). Multilingualism was also represented in everyday practice. The Achaemenid Empire stretched from the Ind River to Little Asia and Egypt and it was home to 44% of the human race. No empire before it took up as much territory and was as international as the Achaemenid Empire. Archaeological findings in the capital, Persepolis, show that the international character of the empire strongly stood out and was very reputable. These multinational structures implied the use of different languages and the Persian language was not necessarily imposed on other people. Tucker cites that Elamite and Aramaic were frequently used in the administration, concluding that the linguistic diversity of the Achaemenid Empire was sometimes a threat and an insurmountable obstacle to the Greeks, who at the time were at constant war with the Persians. The Greeks could not decide on which language would be best to learn in order to understand the Persians. On the other hand, the Greeks reinforce their use of the Greek language, so the bigger obstacle preventing the contact of the Greeks and the Persians was the Greeks' attitude towards barbaric people, and their unwillingness to learn foreign languages. Even Herodotus, who showed interest in the Persian language, rarely mentions Persian words (E. Tucker 2007: 774–775). In Iranian tradition, multilingualism was a common phenomenon because foreign

languages were used in the Sasanian Palace (3rd–7th century). There were also palaces during the period after the appearance of Islam that used both Persian and Arabic.

2. Multilingual Prejudices in Linguistics

Iranian tradition is not an exception in relation to the multilingual situation in other societies. In fact, multilingualism is a more frequent phenomenon, while monolingualism represents an exception (S. Romaine 2003, A. Pavlenko 2005). Particularly multilingual areas are the Indian subcontinent and some parts of Africa (C. Kemp 2009, R. Bugarski 1997). Studies show that a monolingual country does not exist, because even in countries with one official language, there are smaller or larger communities whose native language is different (D. Crystal 2007). However, previous linguistic studies have focused on the analysis of certain languages, even when those languages were compared, classified and typologized, whereas multilingualism as a phenomenon was usually described sporadically in those studies. The fact that languages exert mutual influences and that contacts between them exist was previously noticed, but language contacts are not observed in the context of multilingualism. Linguists described changes in the levels of linguistic systems while in isolation, that is when they are separated from the original speakers (S. Romaine 2003). This kind of perspective on multilingualism in linguistic culture is rooted in European history, because standard European languages are viewed as naturally belonging to one nation, which had bounded territory, and modern linguistics was developing in Europe and North America. This was a "one on one" relationship, so forming a new country meant the "invention" of a new standard language. Being a member of a nation meant being a native speaker to the language of that nation and sharing it with other countrymen. Compared to this monolinguistic perspective, multilingualism represents a deviation from the norm, because it is considered a consequence or violation of language order, as it happens during a conquest or migration (P. Auer/ Li Wei 2007). Since the 1960s, multilingualism was treated as a phenomenon of migration from the south to the north of Europe, before the general ability of the members of a certain society to communicate in multiple languages was put in the forefront of linguistic research. Sporadic analyses of early bilingualism in children and studies on languages and contact first appeared, but in those studies as well, bilingual people are seen as an exception rather than a rule (R. Franceschini 2009). In prior studies, bilingualism dominated, and multilingualism was considered a variant. However, these studies were dominant topics and phenomena that were characteristic for monolingual communities and for a better understanding of a speaker who shares a common life space.

Sociolinguistics and Linguistic Anthropology gave a strong incentive to the studying of multilingualism. But this phenomenon still isn't acknowledged completely by formal grammarians, who search for an interior and unchangeable principle in the linguistic ability of a speaker. The main difference between Sociolinguists, Linguistic Anthropologists, and formal grammarians is their definition of a linguistic community. The definition of a linguistic community stems from different perspectives. When analyzing a linguistic community, formal grammarians

start with the assumption that the society they are working in is homogeneous. Chomsky believes that linguistics is a part of cognitive psychology, and that the mission of a linguist is to explore the nature of the human language and mental competences. The studying and description of linguistic competence, according to him, are more scientific than the description of the current performance, that is, the use of language in a specific case (J. Edwards 1994). In order to study these features, linguists must have a person who will adopt a certain language under the condition of clean and uniformed experience, since linguistic theory is interested primarily in the ideal speaker-listener exchange in a homogeneous speaking community. Linguistic communities in which people use more than one language would not be "clean" enough to be an ideal object of research for theoretical linguistics (N. Chomsky 1986). So, only native speakers who grew up in monolingual societies can judge the acceptability of certain words or statements based on their intuition.

Language idealization like this is not accepted by Sociolinguists and Social Anthropologists, who consider that the search for a "clean" and linguistically homogeneous society excludes most, if not all, societies in the world, because all societies that have been systematically studied show a certain amount of linguistic, social and cultural heterogeneousness. It would be difficult to find a "clean" enough linguistic society today because of globalization and international communication. Therefore, the formal outlook on language today is considered to be a monolingual prejudice (A. Pavlenko 2005). Sociolinguists and Linguistic Anthropologists apply their knowledge in real societies, rather than searching for ideal and "clean" ones. These scholars would rather apply their knowledge and scientific wisdom to avoid the traditional and incorrect belief that it would be better if we all spoke the same language (A. Duranti 1997).

Linguistic homogeneousness is also an ideological construction that is historically rooted in the European history of national languages. It attempts to build a national identity using a common language that will have a single name. Homogeneous linguistic societies never really existed in European societies, because countries even with one standard language were multilingual societies. The creation of the European Union bolstered support for linguistic diversity in European society. But this loyalty was tested when European society started becoming more diverse. It became clear that complex and heterogeneous societies do not function in linguistically homogeneous communities. That is why the multilingual competence in Europe today is highly valued (R. Franceschini 2009). A shift like this in regard to multilingualism directed the attention of scientists to different aspects of multilingualism in European history. The relationship between Latin and national speech had a significant place in this research (J.N. Adams 2003, A. Mullen/ P. James 2013), as did the model of multilingualism and multilingual communication in the Austro-Hungarian empire (R. Rindler-Schjerve/ E. Vetter 2007).

3. Basic Terms in Multilingualism

It is not easy to adequately define a complex term like multilingualism, since different approaches to research and different research traditions do not define multilingualism

the same way. A simple definition would be: Multilingualism represents the capacity of societies, institutions, groups and individuals to use more than one language in real space and time. Multilingualism is the product of basic human ability to communicate in multiple languages (R. Franceschini 2009). In the past two decades, after the appearance of studies on the function of different languages in social communities, the phenomenon of multilingualism became a popular topic in the science of language (J. Edwards 1994, S. Romaine 2003, J. House/ J. Rehbein 2004, P. Auer/ P. Wei 2007, Li. Wei/ M. G. Moyer 2008, L. Aronin/ B. Hufeisen 2009, D. Crystal 2010). This topic has been discussed in general overviews of linguistics (R. Bugarski 2003, D. Crystal 2007), and a growing interest in multilingualism has resulted in the establishment of The *International Association of Multilingualism*, and the launch of *The International Journal of Multilingualism* in 2004. Different aspects of multilingualism are researched under several different linguistic disciplines, such as sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, neurolinguistics, pragmatic linguistics, applied linguistics, educational linguistics, as well as the application to concrete language study programs (L. Aronin/ B. Hufeisen 2009).

There have been two occurrences that have significantly altered the view on the phenomenon of multilingualism. One is the extinction of a large number of languages due to the expansion of English, French, and Chinese along with other languages; and the other is increased language and cultural diversity in Europe and North America, as a consequence of a large wave of migrations from all over the world.

Regarding the first occurrence, it is important to note that in some parts of the world language diversity is shrinking every day. For example, in Africa it is easier to promote English and French than it is to protect the diversity of language (S. Romaine 2003). Concerning language and cultural diversity in Europe and North America, there is a bigger call for multilingualism because of the need to communicate with migrants from different cultural backgrounds, which has been influenced by events from the near past.[1] From the perspective of multilingualism, immigrants who are expected to use different languages to fulfill the most basic needs are much more interesting to researchers than locals who often refuse to acquire more than one language.

It is necessary to point out the difference in meaning between bilingualism and multilingualism. While bilingualism was a major focus in sociolinguistic study in the second half of the 20th century, multilingualism had only been researched in the context of bilingualism. Recently, the two have traded places, and bilingualism is now more often considered an example of multilingualism (L. Aronin/ B. Hufeisen 2009). These two terms need a clearer separation: most researchers use the term bilingual to refer to people who speak two languages, while multilingual is used for people who speak three or more. As the research expands, we can discern more important

---

[1]A deficiency in multilingual speakers was recorded after Septermber 11th, 2001 in the USA, at a time when they were actually needed most. The FBI had issued a call for people who speak Arabic, and there were 70,000 applications submitted. However, after these people were interviewed, it was concluded that there were very few of those who can speak both Arabic and English well. Linguists concluded that people in America live in closed communities more than it was previously thought, and how the need for multilingual speakers is much higher. For more, see: Pratt 2002: 1286-1287

differences between bilingual and multilingual people, just as we can see differences between multilingual people who speak a different number of languages (C. Kemp 2009).

The difference between individual and social multilingualism has become an important contemporary field of study. Individual multilingualism refers to the multilingual abilities of each individual speaker. Multilingual speakers show a range of different abilities that are recognized beyond linguistics. For example, they showcase a high level of development of many cognitive features, such as creative thinking and the ability to change perspective. Students who speak two languages achieve better results in cognitive tests than students who only speak one. For students who speak two languages, it is easier to learn a third or fourth language. The creative potential of multilingual individuals can therefore be beneficial to society at large. Multilingualism in an individual is an advantage, while monolingualism is a handicap.

In terms of individual multilingualism, researchers take into account the level of knowledge of the different languages that the speaker uses when determining whether or not they can be called multilingual. During the last century, there have been different definitions of the lower threshold of knowledge that speaker needs to have, in order to be a research subject for the study of multilingualism. But generally, that threshold has been steadily declining. As we take into account a higher number of languages in a speaker, we tolerate a lower threshold of multilingual knowledge. We can compare Bloomfields' understanding of bilingualism as the "initial mastery of both languages" with Haugens', who defines it as "when the speaker of one language can make statements, which are complete and have the same meaning, in another language". The latest research does not require native-like knowledge from the multilingual speaker, as that kind of speaking ability depends mostly on the speaker's age at the time of learning. Today, there is a widespread belief that it is a myth to measure the speakers' knowledge of a language in terms of how native-like it sounds. A person can be considered multilingual if they can use multiple languages without much struggle, and if they are able to switch from one to the other when necessary, independent of whether they know the languages equally well, or the way and age at which they learned it (G. Lüdi 2006)[2]. Researchers today are much more interested in categorizing a complete inventory of all of the languages an individual holds, rather than their abilities. In other words, every language in the system of an individual speaker is a part of that system, and therefore cannot be observed in isolation as the language of a monolingual speaker. The stress is on the speaker and their "colorful language", and not the languages themselves in relation to their system. It is difficult to clearly define the level of knowledge of a certain language in a speaker, and because this also changes with time, testing sometimes only refers to a speaker's ability during a certain period of time. This threshold is most often determined based on the certain needs of the research, because this type of research encompasses different domains and uses a specific approach (C. Kemp 2009).

---

[4] Lüdi adds how a Sicilian guest worker, who only learned enough Swiss and German dialect to fight for his life in Switzerland, can be called a bilingual person (even though in a different way), just as a translator working for the European Union who speaks English and French with native-like fluency can be called bilingual.

Social multilingualism refers mainly to languages that are spoken in a specific geographical territory and is a subject of research for sociolinguistics and anthrop linguistics. A problem arises by even trying to define language in such circumstances. It is not always easy to treat different languages as isolated systems with clear boundaries, as has happened in the past. This is easily done on the example of languages which are geographically distanced, or ones that belong in different language families, but in reality the circumstances are much different. Different varieties of language are often times used in the same territory, or sometimes the territories overlap. We can find this scenario in India. Depending on the topic of the research study, not all researchers have the same criteria to determine what constitutes a language or dialect. The criteria for differentiating language from dialect are often uncertain and inconsistent. Generally, if two groups of people speak somewhat differently, but can understand each other, it is a case of two languages. However, even this criterion is not completely certain and unequivocal. For example, speakers of Swedish, Norwegian and Danish language can communicate easily, just like the speakers of the Ex Yugoslavian languages. In these cases, there is an understanding between the formally different languages. On the other hand, there are often cases where speakers of different, distanced dialects of the same language cannot understand each other. Because of this situation, there is a dialect continuum, and it is not always a case of clearly separate languages. Examples of these continuums include one from Norwegian, on the coast of the North Sea, and Bavarian, in Tyrol. A similar situation is that of Slavic languages, and up to a point Romani, where the speakers of two neighboring dialects/languages can understand each other, which is not the case for ones that are separated by other dialects/languages (R. Bugarski 1997, I. Mühlhäuser/ B. Höldke 2002, C. Kemp 2009).

The dialect continuum is a sociolinguistic phenomenon, but in its nature, it is connected to psycholinguistics, because multilingual speakers can view the boundaries between languages differently. Namely, monolingual speakers tend to draw differences between languages, while multilingual speakers view similar languages as the same. The criteria for mutual understanding seem insufficient also in the cases of asymmetrical understanding, where one member of a specific community can understand the other, but not the other way around. An example is the use of standard and non standard language use, and sometimes even two different standard languages. For example, English and French are official languages in Canada, but English speakers often don't understand the French, but the other way around is much rarer. Similar to that, in Great Britain native English speakers are not required to speak Welsh or Scottish, while everyone is expected to speak English.[3] In addition, just as it is unclear what a language is, it is not always easy to define a speaker of a certain language, since many communities and their members are so multilingual that the entire concept of a mother tongue becomes problematic (R. Bugarski 1997). Because of all of this, it is hard to make a clear distinction between individual and social multilingualism.

This distinction is not made easier when talking about receptive and productive

---

[5]On this, as well as similar examples, see: Romaine 2003: 516–517

multilingualism. One of the possible examples of multilingual communication in the European Union is mentioned by the model of receptive multilingualism (R. Rindler-Schjerve/ E. Vetter 2007). Receptive multilingualism represents the ability a speaker has to understand other languages, but not necessarily to speak them. In contrast, productive multilingualism refers exclusively to the multilingual abilities of an individual speaker and his or her ability to communicate in multiple languages by way of speech and understanding. Receptive multilingualism is mostly related to social contexts, in which speakers each speak their native language while still understanding each other. However, receptive skills are dependent upon the individual speaker, to a certain extent, and are not just tied to social multilingualism.

Given that the multilingual field of research is constantly expanding, we cannot fail to mention the scope and significance of the research that is approached through the perspective of individual language systems and specifically language contact. This research uses, for the most part, knowledge gained through the different levels of linguistic analysis: phonetic-phonological, morphological, syntactic, semantic and lexical. In this field of study, bilingual research is still the most common, with its main goal being to explain how language systems co-exist and function in an individual and social context. It is widely accepted that the two languages spoken by bilingual individuals are very accessible to each other and that the interaction between these two individuals include both words and entire sentences (J.F Kroll/ P.E. Dussias 2013). The most commonly cited terms in this type of research are codeswitching, which usually refers to lexical contact between languages, and interference, which can be lexical as well as grammatical. Lexical interference mainly overlaps with code switching and is more often represented in studies on multilingualism than grammatical interference. The reason for this is that in language contact it is much simpler to notice and describe the lexical influence from one language to another than it is to find the rules of grammatical interference. What code switching and grammatical interference have in common is that they both appear in bilingual interaction, as well as appearing in individual statements. Recently, researchers have concentrated on studying phonology within the framework of lexical research from the perspective of language contact, specifically the intonation in language contact. But this type of research into language contact on the phonetic-phonological level is generally less represented than higher levels of linguistic analysis (P. Muysken 2013). Still, the growing range and significance of the research into language contact and the interference of language systems shows that this field is alive and dynamic.

4. Perspective in the Research on Multilingualism

Since multilingual research has expanded into many different academic fields and scientific disciplines, the terminology on multilingualism is constantly growing. It appears that the growth of interest into multilingualism is leading to change, which could mean that multilingualism is imposing itself as a new linguistic discipline (C. Kemp 2009). However, given the nonconforming approaches and methodologies of observing multilingualism from different perspectives and traditions, there is still no uniform terminology. Based on the selected insight into the research thus far, the

following possible directions and themes of future research should be explored: historical dimensions and roots of multilingualism with the goal of improving understanding of this phenomenon, researching and re-evaluating previous studies, and research that will raise awareness on minority and endangered languages in order to protect them and assure further development. It is also necessary to view the statistical information and legal status of multilingualism in different countries and the use of different languages in international institutions. The relationship between multilingualism and discourse without a doubt offers more space for future research, with an emphasis on the need for more detailed research on multilingualism in individual speakers. Finally, integrating methodology from different subdisciplines will contribute to further development in the study of contact between languages and the interference of language systems.

References

Adams, J. N. (2003), *Bilingualism and the Latin language*. Cambridge.

Aronin, L./ B. Hufeisen (eds.) (2009), *The exploration of multilingualism: Development of research on L3, multilingualism and multiple language acquisition*. Vol. 6. Amsterdam.

Aronin, L./ D. Singleton (2012), *Affordances theory in multilingualism studies*. In: Studies in Second Language Learning and Teaching 3.2, 311–331.

Auer, P./ Li Wei (eds.) (2007) *Handbook of multilingualism and multilingual communication*. Vol. 5. Berlin.

Bloomfield, L. (2003), *Experimental observation of magnetism in rhodium clusters*. In: Physical Review Letters 71.6, 923.

Braunmüller, K./ G. Ferraresi (2003) (eds.), *Aspects of multilingualism in European language history*. Vol. 2. Amsterdam.

Bugarski, R. (2003), *Introduction to general linguistics.* 4th edn. Belgrade.

Bugarski, R. (1990), *Minority Language Protection in Europe*. In: Примењена лингвистика 10, 7–18.

Bührig, K. / J. Thije (2006), *Beyond misunderstanding*. In: K. Buhrig/ J.D. ten Thije (eds.), Linguistic Analyses of Intercultural Communication. Amsterdam.

Chomsky, N. (1986), *Knowledge of language: Its nature, origin, and use*. Westport, CN.

Crystal, D. (2012), *English as a global language*. Cambridge.

Crystal, D. (2007), *How language works*. London.

Duranti, A. (1997), *Universal and culture-specific properties of greetings*. In: Journal of Linguistic Anthropology 7.1, 63–97.

Edwards, J. (1994), *Multilingualism*. London.

Franceschini, R. (2009), *The genesis and development of research in multilingualism.* In: The Exploration of Multilingualism: Development of Research on L 3, 27–61.

House, J./ J. Rehbein (eds.) (2004), *Multilingual communication*. Vol. 3. Amsterdam.

Kemp, C. (2009), *Defining multilingualism*. In: The Exploration of Multilingualism: Development of Research on L3, Multilingualism and Multiple Language Acquisition 6.

Kroll, J.F./ P.E. Dussias (2004*), The comprehension of words and sentences in two languages.* In: The Handbook of Bilingualism, 169–200.

Ludi, G. (2006), *Multilingual repertoires and the consequences for linguistic theory.* In: Pragmatics and Beyond New Series 144, 11.

Merrison, A.J. (2013), *Introducing language in use: A course book*. London.

Mirbagheri, S.A. / M. Ebrahimi/ M. Mohammadi (2014), *Optimization method for the treatment of Tehran petroleum refinery wastewater using activated sludge contact stabilization process*. In: Desalination and Water Treatment 52.1–3, 156–163.

Mühlhauser, I./ B. Höldke (2002), *Information zum Mammographiescreening – vom Trugschluss zur Ent-Täuschung*. In: Der Radiologe 42.4, 299–304.

Mullen, A./ P. James (eds.) (2012), *Multilingualism in the Graeco-Roman worlds*. Cambridge.

Muysken, P. (2004), *Two linguistic systems in contact: Grammar, phonology and lexicon*. In: The Handbook of Bilingualism, 147–68.

Pavlenko, A. (2005), Bilingualism and thought. In: *Handbook of Bilingualism: Psycholinguistic Approaches*, 433–453.

Rindler-Schjerve, R./ E. Vetter (2007), *Linguistic diversity in Habsburg Austria as a model for modern European language policy.* In: Receptive Multilingualism: Linguistic Analyses, Language Policies and Didactic Concepts, 49–70.

Romaine, S. (1999), *Bilingual language development*. In: The Development of Language, 251–275.

Tucker, E. (2007), *Greek and Iranian*. In: A.-F. Christidis (ed.), A History of Ancient Greek from the Beginnings to Late Antiquity. Cambridge, 773–785.

Wei, Li/ M.G. Moyer (eds.) (2009), *The Blackwell guide to research methods in bilingualism and multilingualism*. London.